

A REPORT ON THE FEMRITE **RESIDENTIAL WORKSHOP**

Theme : **Telling Uganda's Tales**
Date **12 -16 JANUARY 2009**

Compiled by:
Lillian Tindyebwa
Volunteer at FEMRITE
Email: lillymkt@yahoo.com
Tel: 0772 589490

1.0 INTRODUCTION

FEMRITE - Uganda women writers association celebrated ten years of excellence in 2006. Its major objective since its inception has been the promotion of women writing in Uganda.

And one of its main strategies is to create an enabling atmosphere for women to write and publish their stories. Already FEMRITE has published 24 titles all written by women.

Training of women is one of the ways to ensure that the writers keep up with new trends in writing, and that they are able to write. To ensure that women build up their skills, capacity building workshops are held from time to time

It was under these auspices that the residential workshop was organized.

2.0 BACKGROUND TO THE RESIDENTIAL WORKSHOP

Under its newly launched re-strategizing process, FEMRITE recognizes the fact that there is need to strengthen her capacity in order to develop into a more sustainable women writers' organization in Uganda.

In order to achieve this it was realized that there was need to ensure that the members were enabled to improve their skills. There was also the realization that FEMRITE has had a steady increase of new members during the last two years and it was necessary to ensure that a skills development approach was followed to help them be absorbed into the writing arena.

2.1 FUNDING AND SUPPORT

The FEMRITE Residential Workshop was funded by:

- ArtVenture, and
- American embassy (which took care of Air ticket and accommodation for the Ms Tayari Jones- the main facilitator)

3.0 DAY ONE – MONDAY 12TH MARCH 2009

The first day of scheduled 5 day residential workshop started at 9.00am on Monday at Hotel International Muyenga. After a brief welcome, the coordinator asked the participants to introduce themselves. Below is a line up of who was who at the residence:

She said that the rule of the workshop was to work together, but that the major thing was to be confident and let their work be read out. She called this idea ‘Putting the baby on the bus.’”

Sharing experiences- During this session, participants shared on a variety of topics:

- Jemeo said that she felt words boiling in her head to write a poem entitled *Missing*.
- Beatrice said she had a book club that meets once a month and entreated the participants to join.
- Tayari Jones informed the participants that she had brought copies of P M S magazine which were sent by the publishers as a gift to FEMRITE. She also brought MOSAIC magazine and photocopies of a variety of pieces of writing from different sources.

She encouraged the writers to send articles to these magazines. She also told them that there is currently an interest in African writers and so it would be a good thing to write. She informed the members that even the new American President Obama is a published writer and that because of this, it was believed that there would be a renewed interest in the arts.

The Blog- Participants wanted to know more about her blog and she told them that she keeps it as a resource so that anyone trying to get information on writing can find it there. She said that for example organizations like Breadloaf could have interesting programmes but those that need them could fail to get the information. Her blog is www.tayarijones.com.

She encouraged the writers to always put down their specific goals in writing so that they could know if they were doing what they set out to do.

After the break tea, the group divided into two.

A group of new writers stayed with Tayari Jones and those that had a bit more experience went to do private writing

PUBLIC READING AT NATIONAL THEATRE:

FEMRITE had organized a reading for Tayari Jones at the National Theatre. She read from one of her books: *The Untelling*.

After the reading, there was a Q&A session. The audience showed a lot of interest in her books and many had read them. One of the most frequently asked questions came up quickly enough and that was about the character called Tayari Jones in *Leaving Atlanta*. She said that whatever happens to Tayari in the book happened to her.

Of course there was curiosity about her name Tayari. She told them that yes it was a Swahili word meaning ‘ready’. She said that there is always a reason for parents to give names and that is what she wanted to bring out in naming one of her characters

Genevieve. She said that she wanted to show that parents give their children unique names as if to lift them up to the level that they would wish for them to be.

And about whether she was involved in the accident described in the *Untelling*, she said that although she had ever been involved in it was not the one described.

The questions ranged from whether she experienced growing from the experience of writing, she said that one cannot help but grow from the experience.

One member of the audience wanted to know if she was castigated for being a racist by writing a book that uncovers racism in American society. She said it was not only about race but about class as well. She explained that reading in USA is very segregated. So those who read her book were mainly black people, but the whites who did so at first, did it out of curiosity to see how blacks write.

In *Leaving Atlanta*, she wanted to show the way society closed the eyes as black children disappeared at such an alarming rate. She said that if a white child got lost, it would jam the media especially if she was blonde, because 'lost, pretty girl' is part of American culture.

FEMRITE's Jackee Batanda also had a 'one on one' Q&A and asked her what it was about her that had brought instant success with her two books. Her answer was the modest 'I just got lucky with these two!'

READERS WRITERS CLUB

After the Public Reading, members of the Readers Writers club met at the same venue. They read and critiqued a short story and a poem. The day's activities ended at 7.15pm.

3.0 DAY TWO – TUESDAY 13TH JANUARY 2009

Tuesday started with a free writing exercise for about 30 minutes. A few members were able to read back what they had written.

A short story written by one of the participants entitled 'Growing Up' was read and the exercise for the class was to find ways to expand it. The class looked at different ways to improve the story.

Was the writers plot clear and was the story saying what it was intended to say. Various suggestions were discussed and participants were satisfied with the way it came out.

She explained that the purpose of a critique was not to show how many flaws there were in a story, but to find or show ways how it can be improved. This enables the writer to go away feeling that she/he had been helped.

The next exercise was a writing one, and it was about the names. Each participant was asked to write about how she came to be named and the story behind her name. It was interesting because everyone had a story to tell about their name. Many participants were able to read what they had written.

The last exercise before lunch was to write a story about their mother; this was to a story that they had been told about her. Again more members shared what they had written.

AFTERNOON SESSION

The participant had been requested to come with stories and many of them did. The exercise was to look at them and see what prevented them from being great stories. But before the exercise, members were asked to share difficulties they experienced when trying to write.

The variations of difficult areas were many. One participant said that her wish was to write a multigenerational story from her grand mother to herself. Another one said that her problem was telling a story as someone else. Another wanted to know whether when writing one started with an outline of everything or not. Yet another said that her plot could 'refuse' to go where she wanted it to go.

Another one complained that she could decide whether to write history or fiction.

Others shared about the problem of inability to leave themselves out of the picture, motivation to keep going and getting titles that are great.

One wanted to write this great love story but did not want to be identified with it. Yet others talked of generational problems. The facilitator told the older members that they were the ones to write their own stories because younger people look for stories about their grandmothers.

After discussions of these problems, the participants looked at another story entitled *I Always Know* by Beatrice Lamwaka. The story was set in Northern Uganda and it was about a girl who had what once been abducted but was now back in society and had trauma, due to the horrors she had endured.

For the second part of the afternoon, the participants read "Hunger" by Doreen Baingana, and discussed whether it depicted the true situation of Ugandan boarding schools. The opinion on this was divided.

4.0 DAY THREE – WEDNESDAY 14TH JAN 09

The day opened with an exercise from the manual in which participants were required to complete sentences. This was followed by an exercise of memory. The second part of the morning the participants read through *A Thank You Note* by Doreen Baingana. The title of this story is ironic. They agreed it was a protest story.

The facilitator informed the members that:

A good writer writes about people and their problems while a bad writer will write about problems and the people.

Participants having seen the story in a letter form, were required to do two stories in a letter form, one entitled: *To my mother* another to *Dear Teacher*. "*A Thank You Note* was to be an example to them as they wrote. These exercises were important for the memory.

DAY FOUR- THURSDAY 15TH JAN 09

This was the last day for Tayari Jones' visit to Uganda.

For the first part of the morning there was an exercise of elimination of proverbs in when writing.

This was followed by other exercises from "*What If*".

After break, there were ceremonies of farewell and photo sessions.

After lunch, all the participants moved to the National Theatre where Tayari Jones was scheduled to give a lecture about Martin Luther King Jr. This is what she said about it in her own words, pasted on her blog:

MLK Day Lecture at the National Theatre



[After the Lecture](#)

On my last day in Kampala, I gave a lecture at the Uganda National Theater. Truthfully, I didn't really expect many people to show up. The lecture, "Owning History: The Legacy of The Legacy of Martin Luther King", was scheduled smack in the middle of the day. Further, the scheduled time block was two hours long. Me, being American, just couldn't see folks coming out in the middle of the day for a two hour lecture by someone they never heard of.

Was I ever wrong? The auditorium was packed—even the balcony. This is a testament to the lively intellectual culture of Uganda. My speech was about the way that the legacy of MLK has been altered and stripped of its message of radical social change. I was nervous about the speech. Part of my worry was the matter of my accent. I practiced speaking in such a way that I pronounced all my consonants.

You wouldn't believe the reaction to the lecture. I spoke for about thirty minutes, but the Q&A went on for about two hours more. Some of the questions were personal observations about the legacy of MLK and others had done extensive research and wanted my opinion about the legacy of other civil rights era leaders. And the name on everyone's lips was "Obama."

I don't think I am doing justice to the experience by calling it a Q&A. This was very different from the tepid exchange you would expect after a lecture at an American university. Some of the questions posed were mini-speeches—more advocacy statements than questions. A few people were downright theatrical. One man gave something really close to a rousing rendition of the "I Have A Dream" speech itself! I was called on the carpet for the imperialist foreign policy of the US. I was asked if African Americans are resentful of Obama "because his father was not a slave." (I felt the need to point out that my dad wasn't a slave either.) At the end, it was just so clear to me how much more informed people in other countries are. I cannot imagine an American audience with such a broad understanding of the history of another country.

Afterwards, I signed autographs, and took photos with hundreds of people. I felt like I was living someone else's life. Afterwards, I was spirited off. I had a plane to catch.

DAY FIVE: FRIDAY 16TH JAN 09

This was the very last day of the workshop and it was mainly taken up with evaluations, and looking ahead.

For the way forward each participant was to write something to be included in an anthology, which was to be published later in the year. All the submissions must not have been published before and had to actually have been developed or improved during the workshop.

What did participants then have to say about the workshop? From the comments put down by participants, the workshop met their needs.

They liked the venue and they were very motivated and uplifted by the facilitator. They all said that their level of creativity had risen and they were going to do even more writing. Most of their expectations were met and they recommended that there should be such training more often.

CONCLUSION

The FEMRITE residential workshop came at a time when it was really needed because it had been a long time since FEMRITE had had such training.

All the participants are required to write pieces that will be included in a forthcoming anthology. From the level of enthusiasm, cooperation and reflection during the workshop the stories and poems promise to be great. This is something to look forward to, one participant said in her evaluation.

The workshop closed on Friday at 5pm.

